

# What the Pandemic is Teaching Me about Church



---

## Co-missioners,

Carol Braun reflects today on how the pandemic has driven changes in the way she thinks about church and appreciates it too. We think you'll want to share this widely. We pray that you will.

On another note, we're delighted to underscore that registration for next January's Crossings seminar is now open ( January 23-25 in Belleville, Illinois). If you're on our mailing list, you got

a note about this last Friday. For details about the seminar and to register, [click here](#). To see you there will be a joy!

**Peace and Joy,**  
***The Crossings Community***

---

---

---

---

# What the Pandemic is Teaching Me about Church

by Carol Braun

In the early months of our current pandemic, when the ground was shifting and I was grasping for stability, I confess that I sought some comfort in romantic notions of cultivating life inside the home. Nursery school canceled? No problem, I told myself; I've always wanted to try my hand at homeschooling. We need masks for the family? No problem; I'd been meaning to practice my sewing anyway. I was not alone in these impulses: see "[quarantine baking](#)," which became a meme unto itself, with all the usual social media nonsense accreting to it as time went on.

In those early months, worship too became—jarringly, for the first time in many of our lives—something we did primarily at home. It was mediated and helped along by technologies we would

have lacked had we been hit by this plague a generation ago. (Thank God for all those livestreamed services and Zoom Bible studies.) But it also extended beyond the reach of electronic media, in ways I trust will stick with me long after this virus has settled into the background.

My congregation is too small for a Sunday school. My sons, aged four and six, are the only children there. Before Covid, we had a monthly Christian Ed program with kids from the two other small Lutheran congregations in our parish. When Covid shut that program down, I found myself taking my sons' Christian education into my own hands, at home, in ways I'd neglected to do before. Out came the children's Bible. Out came the stack of weekly Sunday school packets which the Christian Ed teacher had given me diligently for years, which I'd shoved away into a closet. Having lost a formal structure away from home, we fumbled our way into new routines of reading and discussion and prayer in our living room. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." So said Jesus, and so I felt, with gratitude, as my tongue finally loosened to talk freely with my boys about what the Bible teaches us, what it means to be a Christian, and how being one has shaped my life. Their tongues got trained too: they asked questions, they composed prayers. With those habits in place, it felt natural, during that first summer of Covid, to follow along with a remote Vacation Bible School. When Advent and Lent rolled around, it was easier to work our way through the packet of nightly family devotions that I might once have stashed guiltily in the closet alongside the Sunday school packets. When our parish's in-person Christian Ed program starts up again next month, it won't replace those living-room sessions which have now become our weekly practice. It all strikes me as a startling example of the Spirit of God at work on us, filling a space that had become empty, leading us closer to him.

So, there we were, with our livestream-aided worship and our home Sunday school and so on. We went back to church when the virus numbers were low in our area, and stayed home again when they shot back up. And then the vaccine started rolling out more broadly, and I started thinking about going back to church for good.



And here another confession: when I went to my little church in person before the pandemic, it wasn't always so very different from watching a livestream. Sure, there was small talk before and after the service, and at the monthly coffee hour and quarterly potluck. But many were the Sundays when I slid into a pew, sang and spoke and listened, tried to keep my boys quiet and content till the closing hymn, then packed up their crayons and slid out again with hardly more than a few smiles and waves. I had friends at church, yes. But I didn't have the kinds of close friendships there that I built outside of church, where I could more easily find people in my own stage of life, say, or

people with interests and tastes more similar to my own, or people more thoroughly integrated into my social networks—people whose spouses know my husband, whose kids know my kids. During my time away from in-person church, weeks or even months sometimes went by between times when I reached out to any of my fellow congregants or they reached out to me. It was chilling.

St. Paul tells us that we and our fellow Christ-followers are so closely intertwined and interdependent as to be parts of a single body, and that we err if we hold ourselves aloof from these brothers and sisters:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of each other. (Romans 12:3-5)

Having gone away from in-the-flesh community worship and then returned to it, I'm driven to ask: Is this kind of mystical intimacy something I experience in my little congregation?

Well, actually, now that I think about it, yes, I believe that it is.

To wit: being a small congregation means we all have to take on more jobs just to keep the place running. Lectoring, committee work, singing in the choir, helping prepare for holidays and meals—I've been asked to do these things, and I've been more inclined to say yes because my help is clearly needed. The things I do to chip in, I do imperfectly and sometimes even begrudgingly. I scramble to get the kids into the car an hour early so we can make it to choir practice before the service (usually a little late, I'm sad to say). I find myself boiling

eggs after the kids go to bed on Saturday night so I can make egg salad sandwiches (sometimes mediocre, alas) for the potluck the next day. I sit impatiently, God help me, through sensitivity trainings for the synod. I know that these are mundanities. When the evangelist speaks of our fellowship in Christ, I know that he means not the coffee hour but something far higher and greater—a new life, freed from the shackles of sin and death, shared in common with each other and with Christ. But, having lost these little mundane interactions and then regained them, I am more convinced than ever that they form a big part of how we get knitted together into that marvelous synthesis of interdependent parts.

As we rely on each other and work together on these small jobs, we have to get our hands a little dirty. We expose our imperfections, our sinful natures. We find ourselves in need of forgiveness. And church is the rare place in my life, outside of family, where I can assume that forgiveness is standard operating procedure. It's something we're all expected to offer to each other, because that's how we carry out the commandment that Jesus gave to us specifically as followers of him: that we love one another as we know he has loved us.





Another thing lost when I lost in-the-flesh community worship was, of course, communion. During that time of remote church, I lost the physical, sensory immediacy of receiving the gifts of Jesus' body and blood in bread and wine. I also lost, for that time, the concrete lesson of seeing those same gifts distributed with without qualification or reservation to all the others gathered around me at the table. There, in my congregation, we see Christ poured out for each of us, the young and the old, the weak and infirm, the healthy and strong, the rich and the poor, the village mayor and the ex-con, the bereaved, the abundantly blessed. The magnitude of the gift is amplified when we experience it in communion with each other.

Scripture encourages us to understand the body of Christ-confessors as a temple where God dwells, and where we dwell in God. From 1 John: "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the son of God, and they abide in God" (1 John 4:15). And, with more specific imagery, from St. Paul:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of

God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

This image, too, I find more resonant now that I've lost and regained the experience of worshipping communally. For the most part, the people who come together at my church on Sunday mornings aren't the people I would have sought out as my friends. Were it not for our common confession of Jesus as Lord, we would likely be strangers to each other. But when we make that confession together, especially when we're all gathered in one place where we can see and hear each other, I do often feel myself transported into a new kind of place—a sacred place, a temple of living stones, encompassing the church in every time and place, where God dwells with us.

---

**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**

A publication of the Crossings Community